



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

An Interview with Dame Margaret Drabble

Nick Turner

Conducted at Dame Margaret's home in London, on May 5th 2010.

Dame Margaret Drabble is one of Britain's leading novelists and critics. She has published seventeen novels, two acclaimed literary biographies (on Arnold Bennett and Angus Wilson), and was the editor of the Oxford Companion to English Literature, for its 1985 and 2000 editions.

*Drabble first came to prominence in the 1960s, along with other writers such as Nell Dunn, Lynne Reid Banks and Penelope Mortimer, all of whom were giving fresh and invigorating new portraits of women in modern Britain. Her early novels, in a highly readable way, documented the conflicts between traditional feminine roles and academic and career achievement faced by the author's generation. Her fiction gave agency to female characters, aided by use of first-person narration, in a way that both continued nineteenth-century traditions and paralleled the incipient women's movement. Drabble's fiction of the 1970s became wider in scope, looking at society at large; *The Ice Age* (1977), in particular, is a contemporary condition of England novel. The idea of investigating the way we live now continued in Drabble's trilogy *The Radiant Way* (1987), *A Natural Curiosity* (1989) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991); in the latter, the action widened to take on an international perspective. The trilogy is united by its focus on three women, and how their lives are shaped by history present and past; this idea unites much of Drabble's work.*

*Margaret Drabble's novels of the 1990s and beyond have ranged from a quasi-Gothic investigation of the state of the nation (*The Witch of Exmoor*, (1996)), an investigation of family history and DNA (*The Peppered Moth*, (2001)), to a novel that imagines the voice of an oriental woman of the past alongside that of a contemporary female academic (*The Red Queen*, (2004)).*

*Drabble's status has had extraordinary highs and lows. A bestseller from the 1960s to the mid 1980s, her books went into frequent reprints, and received prominent reviews. She was also frequently studied by scholars and students, and described as the 'queen of literary London'. *A Natural Curiosity*, however, received a critical drubbing. Since then, her fiction has not sold well, and she has rather strangely disappeared from the academic spotlight.*

Drabble's fiction has changed greatly over 45 years of writing; nonetheless, it has retained features such as clear, unfussy language, strong plots, interest in contemporary society, and self-conscious or slightly eccentric narrators. Broadly speaking, her work has often been written in the realist mode; 'feminist fiction' is not an appropriate label, although many of her novels examine how society, environment and marriage impact on individual women.

Her most recent work is the memoir The Pattern in the Carpet: A Personal History with Jigsaws (2009); to the chagrin of her loyal readers she has acquired over the years, Margaret Drabble has stated that she does not intend to write any more fiction.

The following interview has several key areas of focus: literary influences; the literary prize; realism as a mode, and Drabble's use of it; the state of the nation novel; gender and 'women's writing'. We discussed the author's novels as they arose while talking of these subjects.

Q: You have written biographies, articles and papers, and have edited the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, among other things, but it is as a novelist that you are most well-known. In terms of writing, why has it been the novel that has appealed to you most?

A: I have written some short stories, which Penguin are finally going to bring out, but I've written a very few over a very long period of time. I'm keen to get them published. You're right though: I'm much more attracted to the longer form.

Q: Is there any particular reason why you have felt so comfortable with the novel, and why it has become your main form to write in?

A: I started to write novels quite naturally and without really meaning to. I read a lot of novels when I was young, although I suppose most people do; I greatly admired the form and it seemed very flexible. When I discovered George Eliot's words that the novel was 'flexible in our hands', I realised that I hadn't thought of it when I started writing, but that it was absolutely true. You can do anything, as ambitious or unambitious as you like. It seemed natural to me; the characters and the incidents of their lives came to me. On the whole, the short fiction tended to expand to novel length – I thought I would write a short story and it expanded. So I think my natural length is novel length.

Q: At the moment, are there any one or two novels – or indeed any of your works - that you feel are your best, and which you would like to be remembered for?

A: It would definitely be one of the novels. I think *The Needle's Eye* is one I'm extremely proud of; *The Millstone* is the one that goes on and on, but that's because it's got a short and snappy little story that people like. I think I'm proudest of that middle period – *The Needle's Eye*, *The Realms of Gold*, *The Ice Age*. That was my natural writing style and I enjoyed working on them.

Q: That's interesting: critics I have read recently have certainly mentioned those books. *The Needle's Eye* seems totally different to both your 1960s and your 1980s work: it feels very intense – almost Jamesian perhaps?

A: I don't really see this. I see a continuity of preoccupations. All my books sprang more from subject and content than from any conscious stylistic influence. I was examining a severe moral dilemma while writing *The Needle's Eye* and maybe this shows in the syntax.

Q: Which of your novels has been the biggest seller?

A: *The Millstone*, definitely. It certainly is in the UK, although I don't know about the US. I never look at sales figures. I just know that it has been through more reprintings than any of the others. It's just gone into a new one in Penguin Decades; I'm very relieved because the last jacket was lamentable, and the new one is quite zingy.

Q: I'm very interested in literary prizes, and in how they make a writer visible – sometimes for the right, sometimes for the wrong reasons. Sometimes, I think, it can create a lot of unnecessary publicity – the wrong people win. I heard a story that you had asked for your work not to be considered for a major literary prize. Is this true?

A: Yes, that's absolutely true. Around the end of the 1970s, I thought that the whole prize culture was getting out of hand, and I asked for my books not to be put in for the Booker Prize anymore. My novels had been selling quite well enough anyway. I was very interested to see in Alan Sillitoe's obituary (he was a great friend of ours) that he told his publishers very early on, after he won the Hawthornden, not to put his books in for any more prizes. He must have declined honours; he didn't accept anything. I really admired that – I didn't have as much foresight as he did. What I felt with the Booker Prize, which I've always refused to judge as well, is that it creates a disproportionate amount of fuss. At the beginning, nobody minded; nobody noticed when Penelope Fitzgerald and Bernice Rubens won it. Then the whole thing gathered a rather appalling momentum, and people became very malicious about one another. Iris Murdoch was always said to have got it for the wrong book; why didn't Doris Lessing ever win it; the whole thing's ridiculous.

Q: Why did Anita Brookner get it in 1984 and not Angela Carter...

A: Exactly. On it went. I think the whole prize culture is completely out of hand. There are two things that have gone wrong with the marketing of fiction: one of them is big advances, and the other is the prize culture. It's been very bad for the way people write. When you meet a gathering of young novelists now, all they talk about is whether they are writing literary or commercial fiction. I think it's such a naff question, but they're obsessed by it.

Q: Emma Tennant was very indignant about the post-Scott Pack Waterstone's world [Pack was head buyer for this book store, the leading one in the UK, until 2006], where literary fiction has to be marketable, and only works that will sell are pushed and put on display, with new writers not being given a chance.

A: Absolutely true: and it's not done Waterstone's much good, and Scott Pack has left. It was not a good policy for them. The problem is partly Amazon's fault: competition from Amazon has left High Street booksellers in disarray. I entirely agree with Emma: the wrong things are promoted for the wrong reasons.

Q: Of course, another thing that bookshops like to market is prizewinning fiction. We've talked about the Booker; Patricia Duncker has suggested the problem of why the Orange Prize uses the word 'accessibility' in its list of qualities it's looking for, along with 'excellence' and 'originality'. It's not that a book should be consciously inaccessible – but what message does this send out about women and art?

A: I've always refused to judge the Orange Prize as well. The only fiction prizes I have judged have been foreign fiction prizes, where you won't tread on anyone's toes and the remit is clearer. I did judge the John Llewellyn Rhys, but that's for younger writers and includes non-fiction. The Orange Prize makes me uneasy for various reasons – like the Booker, it tends to over-promote, with a lot of media hype, and I am uneasy about an all-woman prize, although I approve of positive discrimination in other spheres. But it has had some good winners and done some writers some good.

Q: Some of the shortlisted entrants and winners seem rather 'book club' - why should something be trumpeted as excellent art if it is just a good read?

A: I agree.

Q: Let's talk about a favourite question for writers now: influences. Are there any writers that particularly fed your imagination when you started out?

A: Those of the whole Victorian period up to Henry James, which I studied at University. I started writing with the great Victorian writers in my mind. It was only *after* I started writing that I read others. The only two living writers I read at university, who influenced me, were Angus Wilson and Saul Bellow. Both influenced me quite seriously; and both were men, which is interesting. I had published four novels before I read Doris Lessing. I didn't really read Virginia Woolf until later – nobody did when I was young; she was very out of fashion.

Q: What was the first novel by Lessing that you read?

A: *The Golden Notebook*, and I was profoundly impressed by it. Although I had already started as a writer, she had a big influence on me later on. I admire her for her fearlessness – she changes direction, moving from science fiction, to realism, to something else, and boldly attempts to ask very large questions about society.

Q: Something like *The Millstone* would be tempting to identify as influenced by Lessing – but clearly it couldn't be, as you hadn't read Lessing at that point.

A: No – but I had read Sylvia Plath before I wrote *The Millstone*. And the birth scene in *The Waterfall* has Plath connections.

Q: Do you think Plath might also be an influence, then?

A: Plath as a poet and as an exemplary tragic life has influenced me profoundly, but I don't know if that has much to do with my novels. Women of my generation, writers and non-writers, were deeply affected by her struggles with motherhood, survival, career, marriage. Her death was a tragedy for us.

Q: William Boyd wrote a review in which he felt that your concerns in *The Middle Ground* allied you with E.M. Forster; of course reviewers like to make all kinds of links, as do academics. One interesting one that crops up is Woolf.

A: I read *A Room of One's Own* at Cambridge, and rediscovered Woolf in the late 1960s. She was very little read when I was an undergraduate; I don't know that she influenced me at all formally. I did admire Forster. I read all his work while still at school.

Q: It's been suggested that the structural use of a party in *The Radiant Way* evokes *Mrs Dalloway*.

A: That's an interesting point. I think I may have made an intertextual reference to *Mrs Dalloway* in *The Middle Ground*. The party that may have subconsciously influenced me in *The Radiant Way* though was Malcolm Bradbury's party in *The History Man*. After doing the *Oxford Companion*, I didn't know what to do next. I thought 'what do I do life in life when things are going badly? – have a party!' So I thought I'd begin the novel with a party. Bradbury's novel, I realised later, begins with a very similar party, although his is perhaps more satirical in intent. So I'd say he was more of an influence at that particular point than Woolf, although I wasn't conscious of it at the time. When I re-read his novel, it slightly unnerved me. I'm very happy to be compared to Virginia Woolf, but probably it was *The History Man* that prompted the party. *Mrs Dalloway* is a fine novel.

Q: A couple of reviewers have also likened you to Elizabeth Gaskell: I'm guessing this is because of your mixture of readability, humanism and political concern. They obviously mean *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, rather than *Cranford*. Do you like the comparison?

A: I admire Gaskell very much, though her plots can be creaky. I do like *Cranford* too, and 'Cousin Phillis' is a masterpiece.

Q: You are often, perhaps for convenience, bracketed with writers such as Iris Murdoch, Barbara Pym and Penelope Lively. This may be for period reasons, or perhaps because of shared ground. How do you feel about this?

A: Well – they are all enormously different. Murdoch and Pym are *totally* different from one another, and were of a generation older than mine. Murdoch is almost magic realist, with a strong element of the fantastic, whereas Pym is not at all like that. I'd like to think I'm more adventurous in subject matter than Barbara Pym: her world is very confined and static, whereas I always thought I was writing about a different, shaken-up world. I wrote about mothers and children; they didn't, perhaps because they didn't have any themselves.

Penelope Lively does, of course, although I've been going longer than her, and my early novels belong to a different world, the world of the sixties. My early material has more in common with that of Fay Weldon. Edna O'Brien, in the early 60s, again has shared territory, I would say. You don't mention Margaret Forster, but she too is of this period, and writes very well.

Q: How about Nell Dunn?

A: Nell and I are good friends: she is a wonderful writer. She also does mothers and children, but her social range is absolutely, weirdly different. She has a terrific ear for lower-middle-class and working class speech – a much finer ear than I have. Our preoccupations are similar: we have a concern about life.

Q: Penelope Lively is very underrated I think, in the sense that the word 'middlebrow' is sometimes applied to her, and she is not always taken seriously.

A: I haven't read enough of her work to generalise, and distrust labels. What about Nina Bawden? She has much in common with Penelope Lively. And what about Jane Gardam?

Q: Jane Gardam is extremely good, and has something in common with the others. Perhaps writers who also 'do' children's books, like Lively and Bawden, are treated a bit disparagingly? Maybe the same is the case if an older woman writer is somehow seen as too 'readable'?

A: Well, Nina Bawden has written some very fine novels. She writes satiric social comedies that I greatly admire. *Family Money* is a very sharp, astute book; she is a highly intelligent writer.

Q: Let's turn to your work itself, now. Your fiction has changed a great deal over the years, and that is shown if we put something like *The Millstone* next to *The Red Queen*. Do you think there is anything that unites your work in terms of content and themes – or even that unites *some* of your work?

A: Perhaps not: I've set myself different agendas. The *Radiant Way* trilogy and *The Witch of Exmoor* were all a response to the social climate under Thatcher. I don't actually like the tone of some of them now, but felt I was pushed into it by politics. I've been driven by history more than genre.

Q: History as in history as it is being made, you mean? I think you have said in the past that your novels are half way between fiction and sociology.

A: Exactly. But *The Red Queen* was a one off – I became obsessed by multiculturalism, to my cost. I became very interested in the mobile life of intellectuals, and the question of whether there was any universal human nature, any essential qualities, in these global days. A very particular incident inspired it and I'm surprised I wrote it, although once I started it I felt compelled to continue.

Q: And that was followed by *The Sea Lady*.

A: Which is a much more conventional novel in terms of material.

Q: Your 1980s novels seem to share themes of violence, and images of ugliness and dirt. This appears from *The Ice Age* on, really; and this is clearly a response to Britain at the time.

A: Yes, very much.

Q: Do you see yourself as a gendered writer? Some writers see their 'implied reader' as either male or female.

A: I do think of myself as a gendered writer. I write a lot about women's issues. I couldn't possibly be a man, or be mistaken for a male or androgynous writer, and I wouldn't want to impersonate a man. The only one of my novels which is written from a male point of view is *The Ice Age*; I enjoyed doing that and found researching it interesting. I am interested in gender issues as a gendered person, but that doesn't mean I write for women only. Women read more novels than men – that's a fact. I have had a lot of correspondence, mostly from women, who sometimes see themselves and their 'real life' problems in the novels. The letters I have had from men have been from academics and intellectuals, and they have a different agenda. They have been more interested in issues of, say, structure and form. And I have made many friends of both genders that way!

Q: What about the tags 'woman novelist' and 'women's writer'; how do you feel about them?

A: Woman novelist is fine. I am a woman and I write novels. Women's writer I don't like. I don't at all like the suggestion that I am aiming books at a female readership; I don't think I am. I write about the obsessions I have: some are political, such as egalitarianism; some are to do with the old Labour party and the new Left, and they're not very gendered issues.

Q: The lead is normally taken by female characters, though, and there is a strong domestic front.

A: Yes, although a lot of my women do have careers, unlike the work of some of my contemporaries. Anita Brookner is a writer I greatly admire for her dispassionate observation of failure, loneliness and disappointment and my novel *The Seven Sisters* is more like her work than anything else I had written. While I was writing I was puzzled by this Brookner echo, and then I realised where it came from. It was because Candida, the lead character, doesn't have a job. It's about a disappointed woman, making the best of it. It's about ageing and loss.

Q: And making things up! It seems to me right to call it a postmodern novel, but postmodern in the same way that Ian McEwan and Kate Atkinson sometimes are: there is an unreliable narrator, and linearity is played with, but on the other hand a strong sense of character and place.

A: I don't think the 'unreliable narrator' aspect of *The Seven Sisters* is very interesting. It's just a postmodern narrative trick, the sort that any writer these days can do. It's a fashion. The real subject is the temptation of suicide. The unreliable narration of *The Waterfall* is a far more serious matter.

Q: Let's move on ... There is a lot of feeling at the moment – and sometimes bad feeling – about whether writers are literary or commercial/popular. Zoë Fairbairns recently said that if she had to choose between literary prizes and sales/wide readership, she would go for the latter. What are your thoughts on this?

A: I simply don't think in those terms. I have been lucky: I have won some prizes and had a wide readership. I haven't had to choose. I couldn't be commercial and I wouldn't know how to do it if I needed to. I never write a book while thinking 'is this going to sell'. I write journalism for money, not novels.

Q: I'd like to go back to the word 'middlebrow', which has been used against Penelope Lively, and others. Hilary Mantel and James Wood, for example, have described your work in that way. I think it's quite unfair of course, but wondered if you have any reaction to the charge and the term? Mantel once defined the middlebrow novelist as 'a writer who, while disdaining the shoddy and the ephemeral, has built up a following amongst intelligent readers whose notions he takes care not to challenge or disturb'.

A: I think these labels are fairly meaningless. Reviewers and academics love pigeon-holes, but many writers rarely think about them. Doris Lessing doesn't even know what the term 'Modernism' means, and she's a freer writer for it. I want to be readable, and I don't want my education and learning to alienate people. I'd like to think I can be subtle and complex, but that there is an easy surface which does not repel those without a university education.

Q: Maybe your novels work like Jane Austen's, in that the surface is accessible, but there is ambiguity and complexity beneath ... Perhaps we can now talk more generally about realism and the contemporary novel, and how your work relates to it. First, though, I'd like to ask what the Novel should do for you.

A: It should tell me something about the world, about how people live and work. When I say 'should', I simply mean that that is what I look for. Others look for other satisfactions.

Q: Realism is a term that means many things to many people; it's hard to define. How would you define it? People like to use words such as probability, verisimilitude, linearity, closure, character, realistic speech, causality, and so on.

A: Yes – but setting is also important. The terms you mention are academic and stylistic - I am more interested in the novel as a portrait of society. I don't know even know whether it is argued that closure is a symptom of realism, or the reverse. Most of my novels are open-ended, for what that's worth.

Q: You gave a lecture in 1987 (which was later published) in which you supported Auerbach, and went on to say that you share 'The novelist's love of empiric fact, sometimes of apparently irrelevant fact' and that you 'distrust fictions that have become so self-reflecting that they cease to recognize the outside world in any recognizable way', and that you like the humble and the everyday. Do you still stand by this?

A: Yes, I do. I like to be told something new. Novel means new, after all. Auerbach was a great writer, a writer with a deep faith, an almost religious faith, in the importance of narrative.

Q: Would you say you support the Lukacsian idea of the novel as a political 'tool', almost?

A: Novels have been very powerful political tools, of course, but often, as Lukacs recognised, without an overt political intent on the writer's part. History takes over.

Q: Raymond Williams spoke of realism as being the type of fiction where there is an equal interest in character and environment, with the former being influenced by the latter.

A: I think that's right. It's a sound if limited definition.

Q: You once said that you would 'rather be at the end of a dying tradition which I admire than at the beginning of a tradition which I deplore'. This seems to show you as anti-experiment. Do you still agree with these words?

A: Absolutely not. I said it once in passing many years ago to Bernard Bergonzi and it has stuck to me like glue – it's very annoying. I dislike labels. I have come to admire some of the novels which, in the 1960s and 70s, I disliked, and am now a great admirer of the Oulipean Georges Perec, whose *La Vie: Mode D'Emploi* (1978) is one of the greatest and most eccentric novels of the last century.

Q: There has been so much doubt in the twentieth century about representation, truth, and language; do you believe in Stendhal's view that the novel can be a mirror? Many of your narrators are famously self-conscious and unreliable, and directly tell the reader that they do not know or can't remember facts.

A: I think it's very realistic not to be able to remember facts. Omniscience is a deeply unrealistic mode.

Q: So would you describe yourself as a realist writer?

A: Well, the last truly realist novel I wrote was *A Natural Curiosity* and that was over twenty years ago. There have been all sorts of books since then: *The Witch of Exmoor* was rather Gothic.

Q: A cautious realist, perhaps? Patricia Waugh has talked about your work as 'metafictional realism'. Malcolm Bradbury also claimed that you wrote 'moral realism'.

A: I don't know – as I've said, I don't really like labels, and I never read reviews.

Q: If we think of your more clearly realist work, such as *The Ice Age* and the *Radiant Way* trilogy, they are seen as 'State of the Nation' or 'Condition of England' novels'. Do you agree with the label?

A: Yes: that's what they were intended to be, though I don't think those phrases were in my head as I began to write them.

Q: There has been a lot of journalism and criticism saying that the state of the nation novel is no longer tenable, that the nation is too big, diverse and complex to be represented in one novel. D.J. Taylor has said this; Nick Rennison felt that 'Britain in the last twenty years of the twentieth century and the first few years of the new millennium has shown itself as too diverse, too protean to fit within the straitjackets of fictional forms that have outlived their usefulness'. Would you still assert that the state of the nation novel can be done?

A: Yes, I would.

Q: Another common charge is that we can only truly understand contemporary events, and put them into fictional form, with hindsight; people also like to suggest that journalism and the news, transmitted through TVs and our computers in a way they never were before, has removed the need for fiction that reports on our society. What do you feel about this?

A: I don't know what is meant by 'the need for fiction'. I think that the news media have affected the reading public, but they haven't stopped novelists writing novels.

Q: Philip Hensher has spoken in defence of the state of the nation novel; there seem to have been several new condition of England novels in recent years, such as Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* ...

A: And Hensher's *The Northern Clemency*. But both are set in the past, even if it is the recent past. Do you go to the theatre? The play *Jerusalem* is superb: it tells us how we live now.

Q: Mohsin Hahmid's Booker-nominated *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is, I suppose, about how we live now, although it's about a specific topical issue: terrorism.

A: But it's a narrow book, about only one aspect of modern life, as you say.

Q: Are there any writers around who are doing what you did in the 1980s? Has anyone written what you see as a state of the nation novel? Perhaps Monica Ali might qualify ...

A: Zadie Smith as well as Monica Ali, I would suggest. *White Teeth* is an ambitious book.

Q: Although the question here is not exactly the matter of the state of the nation novel, the following words by the novelist Henry Sutton might be interesting. He felt that ‘few novelists today seem willing or concerned enough to tackle real issues of social or economic injustice, and make that move from domestic politics into the realm of the politics of everyday life ... Most literary fiction is still about the middle-classes, and people screwing up their cosy lives, rather than the state screwing them over ... Why has so much contemporary fiction shied away from the gritty reality of most people's lives?’ Do you think he is right?

A: It's the market, you could say. I don't know. I don't read enough to generalise.

Q: Thinking of the theatre, perhaps you like the work of David Hare – his 1980s trilogy which examined the Church, the Law and the Army, and recent work such as *Stuff Happens* and *The Permanent Way*?

A: Hare tries hard to mirror society, and does a good deal of interviewing and research, which I admire. But the surreal realism of Butterworth is something else, something new. Hare's work sometimes strikes me as programmatic. But he has a broad agenda, and I respect that.

Q: We talked earlier about influences; are there any past realists you particularly admire?

A: Balzac and Zola. Zola is tremendous, although he might be more accurately called a naturalist. But it's all realism: *L'Assommoir*, *Germinal*, *Nana*, *Au Bonheur des Dames* are wonderful. He is very undervalued in this country.

Q: Interesting that you mention Balzac. I'm thinking of the start of *Le Père Goriot*, and the long description of Mme Vauquer's boarding house. There is a real sense of environment, and of objects. It reminds me of your 'lists'.

A: Yes – I like lists.

Q: I think we should acknowledge here too that your two big critical books have been on realists – and male realists. Admittedly, Angus Wilson is only a realist sometimes. In terms of Bennett, I would suggest that *The Old Wives' Tale* is one of the great novels. Its character and environment again – rather like in your work, perhaps.

A: Yes, Bennett is indeed a major realist, with a consciously realist agenda, which in his later years began to veer towards modernism. I suppose that my affiliations are more with Bennett than with Henry James, but that is more a class issue than a formal issue. We haven't mentioned class much, but it is clearly relevant to my own preoccupations. It is class as much as form and gender that divides Bennett and Woolf. And in that divide, I am temperamentally and biographically on Bennett's side.

Q: Many people still feel that realism is a conservative form, and that it is at odds with both feminism and multiculturalism, and with experiment. What do you think?

A: No – it's not conservative. Look at who we've been talking about: Zola, who was a great innovator, and a radical. Bennett was always socially progressive. Realism may certainly be deployed for revolutionary ends.

Q: So you think that realism can use traditional structures and forms, but challenge in its content?

A: Yes, I think I do believe that. As some (not necessarily I myself) believe that the historical novel can be radical, not conservative.

Q: Realism versus experiment: that's what many have seen the post-war British novel as being torn between, although many have said that's an over-simplification. I would presume you want to be both realist and experimental, and maybe both at once? I've recently read *The Middle Ground* and wonder if you would see that as your most experimental book – and maybe as late modernist?

A: Again, I'm not good with labels. Actually I think *The Middle Ground* is an awful book – there's no plot, but that's more by default than intention. I recently met someone at an event who said she really liked and identified with Kate Armstrong, which really surprised me. David Lodge politely defined it as neo-domestic-realism, but that's because his academic self likes to find labels.

Q: What do you see as your most experimental book?

A: In formal terms, without question, *The Waterfall*. The split narrative structure of this novel reflects a true chasm, not a literary artifice, and marks an important moment in my 60's feminist thinking. I think the experiment was so successful that nobody noticed it was one.

Q: It's been reported recently that you do not plan to write any more fiction. Is this true? I wonder if you could tell me what direction you see your writing going in?

A: I am old now, and for other reasons also I cannot do the fieldwork that a large social novel requires. Think of the miles that Dickens walked. I cannot do that any more. I wish I could. I write journalism, non-fiction, essays, and experiment with new ideas.

Q: And – to close with the favourite question – are there any contemporary novelists (you haven't mentioned already) whose work you particularly admire?

A: It seems invidious to single out names, but recently I have greatly enjoyed Dan Rhodes, who is not at all a realist. It is good to find an exciting and outrageous new young writer. I also much admire Kazuo Ishiguro, for the sad humanity of his writing and his apprehension of the tragic human condition. Julia Blackburn's work is also very impressive - original, bold, and colourful. She writes with a painter's eye. I am also a great fan of Adam Mars Jones's *Pilcrow*. But these are only some of many whose work I continue to enjoy.

Q: Thank you for your time and for sharing your ideas.

Dr Nick Turner is an Associate Lecturer at Edge Hill University, UK. His most recent book is *Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon* (Continuum, 2010). He has published articles on contemporary fiction and Iris Murdoch, and is also an occasional reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement*. He is co-editor of *Writers in Conversation*.